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# Posthumous

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*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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**POSTHUMOUS**

A Thesis Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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BFA – Frostburg State University 1996

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## Abstract

### POSTHUMOUS

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This thesis reviews the background, influences, and evolution of three works that form *Posthumous*, an exhibit by the thesis candidate. The thesis begins with a series of vignettes that relate a number of personal experiences involving death, and photography, which have influenced the conceptual development of the work. Chapters devoted to each piece follow the vignettes. These chapters refer to the various influences that have led to the development of the following works: *Obit to Self: April 10, 2005*, *Posthumous*, and *Jay*. These influences range from the movie *Hotel Rwanda*, to handbills for punk-rock shows. The thesis ends with a description of the exhibition at the Anderson Gallery.

## A Series of Unlikely Vignettes

I grew up in Marlton, Marlton is a suburb of Upper Marlboro, Maryland. Upper Marlboro, Maryland is a suburb of Washington, D.C.

For the first 18 years of my life I lived less than 10 miles from Thacker Caskets Inc. Thacker Caskets Inc. is located on Alexander Ferry Road in Clinton, Maryland, and I passed the business a few times a week as the road is one of only three ways out of Marlton. I moved to Richmond after having lived for 10 years in Frostburg, Maryland. As excited as I was, to be in an environment that looked (and felt) like the one I had been raised in, it also felt like a sort of homecoming to find that Thacker Caskets Inc. has a manufacturing plant on Marshall Street in Carver.

During the seventh grade in Mrs. LaFaive's Social Studies class, we were required to take a standardized, projected-career-placement test. I answered the 100 plus questions and when the results were returned the final week, it was suggested –based on the bubbles I had darkened with my number 2 pencil- that the careers which best suited my personality were: undertaker, truck driver and mailman.

During my Pop's funeral my mother –whom I did not recognize that day because she was

both younger and older than I had ever seen her- fainted while a tenor sang Ave Maria.

Marlton is only 9 miles from Clinton, MD where the Mary Surratt House Museum is located on Brandywine Road. Mary Surratt, a coconspirator with John Wilkes Booth in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, was the first woman to be executed by the United States Government. Often when family would visit from out-of-town we would tour the museum. Among the artifacts on display was a vitrine containing two photographs taken by Alexander Gardner before and after Surratt's execution. The first photograph shows she and the three others indicted in Lincoln's execution just prior to the release of the gallows' trap door. The second shows the four bodies hanging while the crowd disperses.

Every Sunday I call my Nana and we talk on the phone. When my Pop was still alive they'd joke about jumping off the balcony of their 6<sup>th</sup> floor apartment in Alexandria, Virginia. Now that my Pop has been dead for almost two years, Nana, at 92, still occasionally jokes around about jumping, but more often than not, her talk of dying is more serious. I think that I am the only person that my grandparents ever spoke to this way.

Living just a short drive from Washington DC, on weekends, my family would often visit the National Zoo. My favorite animals to visit were the seals- I could view them from above or below the water's surface- they were often active, and they were always black and shiny. Along the perimeter of their pen was a fence, along the fence were plaques,

and on the plaques were color pictures warning of the dangers of throwing pennies into the water the seals swam in. The pictures showed the hot-pink stomach of an autopsied seal full of shiny, bright pennies.

When I was 17, one of my childhood best friends died in a 42-car pile up on a California freeway. In order for his family to have his casket open during his wake, his face had to be reconstructed. His nose looked like putty and when, through tears I looked at him, all I could think was how he did not look like the pictures that I had of him.

In 1986 I was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade- Middle School- and was in the midst of what were (hopefully) the most awful years of my life. Had I been a girl, I could have been the luckless geek Dawn Weiner in Todd Solodnz's "Welcome to the Dollhouse". On January 28 my science teacher wheeled a television into the classroom, and turned off the fluorescents so that we could watch the Space Shuttle Challenger lift off from Cape Canaveral, FL. On board the Challenger was an astronaut named Christa McAuliffe; a Social Studies teacher from Concord High School in Concord, New Hampshire, McAuliffe was to be the first civilian to go into outer space. Her inclusion in the mission was swathed in a media frenzy praising NASA and the Reagan administration's decision to allow someone so ordinary to do something so extraordinary. 73 seconds after take off, while looking at the screen and thinking how amazing the exhaust from the Shuttle's engines looked against the blue sky, the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded.

A week after the explosion, I heard this joke:

*Q: Did you know that Christa McAuliffe had dandruff?*

*A: They found her Head and Shoulders.*

During the two years that I attended Catholic school, whenever a siren was heard we were required to pray for the safety of those for whom the siren wailed.

In 1971 my father bought nine of the seventeen volumes of Time Life Books' "Life Library of Photography". I perused the clothbound, silver and black books for years-looking at pictures of places that were proof of a life other than the one I knew, and searching for prurient content for masturbating. One volume, titled "The Art of Photography" featured *Adam and Eve*, a sequence of images by Duane Michals that showed a transparent man approaching, and eventually touching, the breast of a sleeping, nude woman. A few pages away, was another sequence by Michals: *Death Comes to the Old Lady*.

For four months I was my Pop's primary caregiver while my Nana recovered from an operation for adhesions in her small intestine. I spent long days with him sitting in his off-white bedroom while he would hold my hand and tell me how badly he wanted to die.

Whenever I visited my Pop before he died I always told him that if he felt like it was "time to go" that he should do so, and not feel guilty. I would say that 94 years was a

long time, and that everyone would understand. Before leaving his room, I would lean down and he would hold my face and kiss me at least six times as I pressed my face against his.

On April 5, 2005 I buried my 12 year-old dog Annabelle in my parents' backyard in Marlton. She had been paralyzed from a fall down their stairs, and when the veterinarian administered the lethal injection I held her. I timed my breathing with hers, smelled her fur, told her I loved her, and felt her body change. I think I can still feel the sensation of her lungs deflating- of her entire body going slack. Her funeral was the first at which I was finally able to take pictures.

The Dead People in my Paper: *Obit to Self: April 10, 2005*

Only that which narrates can make us understand.

-Susan Sontag

Two months ago I watched the film *Hotel Rwanda* and was infuriated. I wasn't angered by the film itself, but by the idea that the lives of 800,000 people, and the history of three months of genocide, had been compressed into a one hour and fifty minute movie. That *Hotel Rwanda* could potentially be viewed as a sort of definitive representation of the Rwandan crisis during 1994 is problematic. If I accept that media such as movies, television and newspapers are (in part) eligible to relay to me the social history of the world, I feel I must ask these questions: What did the director of *Hotel Rwanda*, Terry George, leave out? What parts of the "story" of Rwanda did he augment in order to make a dynamic film? What, specifically, did Terry George want me to remember about what happened in Rwanda? What kinds of decisions were made to appease the financial supporters of the film? What am I "left with" –in terms of understanding the situation- after watching this movie? Unfortunately, what I was "left with" was an impotent message of Hope. Not to deride the many works of art whose message is similar, but, is Hope enough to ask for in the face of 800,000 murdered people? And, are the conventions of the motion picture –its filmic clichés- like sweeping, gestural camera movements, professional actors, use of archetypical myths (Don Cheadle as Luke



Skywalker?), a string section, a conventional, linear narrative structure, mega million dollar production and marketing- the best way to address the horror of the genocide in Rwanda? After watching the movie, I left the theatre despondent and thinking that in the near future there could be a section in video stores titled: “Human Atrocities”. On the shelves in this section could be the slim cases holding pale evidence of what negligently gets passed as history: *The Killing Fields*; *Cry Freedom*; *Romero*; *In the Name of the Father*; *The Magdalene Sisters*; *Schindler’s List*; *Johnny Got His Gun*; *Land and Freedom*; *Missing...*

Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from not accepting the world as it looks. All possibility of understanding is rooted in the ability to say no.  
–Susan Sontag

Similar to movies about atrocities, photographs that depict the “human condition” (war, disease, death, famine...) rely on the concept of simplifying (compressing) information in order to deliver efficient, palatable, and ultimately marketable stories. These stories allow the viewer the illusion of feeling informed and empathetic, while remaining free of being implicated in the events they depict. Photography, a medium whose ubiquity we are forever subject to, is plagued by problems. One problem is the *weight* of photography as a representational medium. As Roland Barthes wrote, photographs are an “emanation of the referent”. This emanation gives the photograph the power to convince its viewer that its ability to represent its subject- in a convincing likeness- implies an understanding of its subject. This ability to represent with the camera- to bear witness, to document, to

show- has carried with it a sense of responsibility that has left the history of the medium peopled with liberal photographers. These photographers hope that their images not only attest to what it is “happening” outside of our homes- they strive for their images to affect positive change in the situations they depict. This sense of responsibility to the referent is photography’s *weight*. Although these aspirations may be asking a lot of the medium, the seeming naiveté of these photographers should not be derided. Larry Burrows’ photographs from Vietnam, and more recently, the images from the Abu Ghraib prison, taken by soldiers participating in the abuse of Iraqi prisoners, became catalysts for action against the situations they documented. In the case of Vietnam, Burrows’ images are credited, in part, for fueling the anti-war protests in the United States during the Vietnam War (Sontag, 1989). Images from Abu Ghraib, though not intended as such, have forced the United States to be more transparent in their treatment of Iraqi prisoners during the ongoing war in Iraq.

While the camera functions to document, it is also a device whose parameters act to edit its subject. This edited view the camera provides is determined by a number of factors: the format of the camera; the focal length of the lens; the type of film used; and the subjective choices involved in the composing, and outputting of the final image. Just as *Hotel Rwanda* was ultimately a movie affected by the forces governing the creation and distribution inherent to the conventions of movie making, the war photograph is ultimately nothing more a piece of paper, or a series of zeros and ones that represent a slim, trace of the world that has been transformed by the camera, and its operator. And,

like a major motion picture, the dissemination of photojournalistic images is determined by the amount of capital they solicit.

Not only in the case of atrocities however, do photographs act as evidence. Snapshots in family albums, images from the Hubble telescope, high school yearbooks, surveillance, and satellite images, all function as proof. These images are permitted to do this because as a lens based culture (Coleman, 1989) we have learned to believe that a photograph represents something true. Regardless of the developments in imaging technology that allow an image to be manipulated easier than ever before, we still believe most of what we see and read.

These issues of accuracy, fallacy, and the camera's image provoked by *Hotel Rwanda*, are similar to those Alfredo Jarr addressed with his series of work from the latter half of the nineties called *Rwanda Projects*. In his book *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics*, David Levi Strauss details Jarr's dealing with the limitations of photojournalism, while trying to convey the slaughter of Rwanda's Tutsi people. Strauss cites Jarr's frustration with the inability for the photograph to show what he had experienced shortly after April 1994:

But the camera never manages to record what your eyes see, or what you feel at the moment. The camera always creates a new reality. I have always been concerned with the disjunction between experience and what can be recorded photographically. In the case of Rwanda, the disjunction was enormous and the tragedy unrepresentable. This is why it was so important for me to speak with people, to record their words, their ideas, their feelings. I discovered that the truth of the tragedy was in the feelings,

words, and ideas of those people, and not in the pictures.

Jarr's frustrations led him to create works that relied more on the text he gathered, than it did the 3000 pictures he took during a visit to the country four months after the massacre. The histories that Jarr's work tells (such as the piece *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*) are complex, interactive, and unlike anything that would have been read in newspapers or seen on television in 1996. By pairing grueling, descriptive text with little or no photographic imagery, Jarr's work forces the viewer to access their own data bank of "human atrocity-as-it-is-represented-by-photojournalism" in order to "see" what the people of Rwanda, and Jarr experienced.

How many of the images we see in the mass media, in textbooks, and in other vehicles, are such spurious, falsified "factoids"? Does anyone in the field consider the consequences to the subjects of such images generated by such misuse? And, on a larger scale, the consequences to the citizenry when its informational network is thus compromised and corrupted?

-AD Coleman.

My frustrations over *Hotel Rwanda* led me to think about the relationship between the photograph and the media, history, editing, and the compression of experience. I began to ask where in the newspaper, and where in life, is the active compression of history frequent, and commonly accepted as fact? This questioning led me to the obituary. Reading the obituaries is a hobby of mine; on Sunday mornings I scan the "obits" looking not for someone I know, but for someone who looks (or feels) like someone I may know. Basically, I scan the obituaries looking for myself.

With *Hotel Rwanda*, and the work of Alfredo Jarr in mind, I became interested in writing my own obituary- what history could I tell of my 32 years by writing it *pre-mortem*? A cursory search on Google for obituaries yielded sites suggesting that business professionals write their own obituaries at the start of their careers. It's thought that by focusing on their legacy, these professionals could have a clear idea of what their long-term goals were, and work accordingly to attain them. I thought that by adopting this corporate model to assert my motivations as an image-maker, I could put to use the gravity, and severity of the obituary to make a proclamation of love and honor, toward my community of friends and family. Could I channel the negativity that my concerns with compression were fueling into something positive? Could something good come out of my frustration?

The activity of an artist staging their own death is not new: the Russian Suprematist painter Kazimir Malevich designed and painted his own coffin before his death in 1935; in his book *Autobiographies*, published in 1981, the writer and artist Richard Kostelanetz included the obituaries he had written for himself since he was an undergraduate at Brown University; in his video *Vajtojca* (2002), Albanian artist Adrian Paci staged his own death, and filmed professional Albanian funeral wailers performing at his ceremony. Although these artists had different reasons for using their death as a point of focus in their work, each used an extreme measure to convey a radical idea: Malevich's coffin, represented his conviction of "the supremacy of pure feeling over art's objectivity"

(Boguslawski, 1998-2000); Kostelanetz's assertion that only through multiple points of view can a person be conveyed through an author's words; Paci's emphasis on the obvious- pointing out that there are important situations in everyday life that we are never able to experience (Curlit, 2003).

I deduced that I could use the obituary to employ a sanctioned form of communication to aid in asserting my motives within an environment that had previously frowned on my exclamations of love and community. With the obituary I felt I could use a cold, sterile device to say something warm. My original plan to write an obituary of only 100 words proved impossible- my first draft totaled 981 words. I thought that if I wrote the obituary well enough, the voyeuristic thrill of reading such a macabre, hubristic document would sustain my readers. This version proved too long. For the piece *Obit to Self: April 10, 2005*, I decided that I would have the obituary and an image of myself printed in The Washington Post. In order to afford the cost of the printing I had to edit the text significantly. This caused me to remove all complexity from my life in order to facilitate a quick, easy read. The text was edited down to 28 words. I chose these words as I thought they best encapsulated the projected function that I want my work to serve. I felt that these words alluded to my history while stating my desired trajectory. The text of the obituary reads:

“In memory of an artist, teacher, friend, colleague and lover who through his photographs of friends and family, worked to honor, celebrate and strengthen the community he loved”.

For the accompanying self-portrait that was printed above the text of the obituary, I was

conscious of trying to look as alive as possible. Knowing that the community I was addressing would be reading these words, I wanted to have my image staring directly at them after their having read the text. The intensity of my stare is meant to mirror the sincerity of my intentions. For the presentation of the piece, I included of all three pages of the Washington Post's obituary section in a single frame. The inclusion of all the other people's photographs and obituaries was intended to highlight the role that the newspaper, and the obituary, plays in compressing history within our culture. Among the three pages of the newspaper and all the other people being memorialized on that day, I present myself as one of many, and, nothing more than a trace of what I may, or may not be.

Writing my own obituary, and having it printed, enabled me to use photography, and the newspaper- two vernacular devices- to write a portion of my own history, while (hopefully) facilitating the realization of my intentions. It is my intention to use these devices to appeal to the viewer's predisposition to believe what is presented to them in a newspaper, and declare what my work *does*. These devices create the condition/illusion of the projected action whether or not this is actually the case. By saying that my work celebrates and honors my community, this idea is planted into the minds of people who do and do not know me. The conventions of the devices utilized, coupled with the resultant assumptions these devices facilitate, allow my assertions to become a form of truth.

### The Pictures Beneath my Bed: *Posthumous*

All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.

-Susan Sontag

Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.

-Roland Barthes

That a photograph can simultaneously represent everything and nothing, the past, the present, the future, death and life, is the existential matter that gives weight to the photographic image. The photo albums, envelopes, boxes, and discs full of photographs that are kept in many closets, under beds, on computer desktops, or in dresser drawers represent not just what is, but as Roland Barthes wrote in *Camera Lucida*, they simultaneously allude to a time when the subject will no longer be (Barthes, p.79). Each of the images beneath our bed contain their own sort of life- each represents a portion of our history. Yet ultimately, these pictures terrorize us by providing evidence asserting the fragility of the relationships we have had with the people in our pictures. These pictures make us realize that the people and pictures we are in love with now will eventually play the same role as those we loved before. In playing this role, each image acts as our own Jacob Marley, warning us of the likelihood that these friends, and these images will end up in a box like those that came before them.



The piece *Posthumous* is an approach to photographic imagery that represents a dialogue between my private and public selves. In order for me to understand where I come from, and what people and situations led me to who and where I am, I have to confront the history of my trajectory. Privately, I ask myself these questions (as I believe that I can improve my future by analyzing my past): Why do I keep all of these pictures of people who are no longer a part of my life? Why did these relationships end? What role did I play in their having ended? Are my memories of this person based on actual experience, or my photographs of this person? What is the relationship between the people in these images and the people currently occupying their places? What of my memories that surround these images are true? Which memories have I fabricated?

Simultaneous to the private questioning instigated by these images, is a series of questions whose perspective is public, and to which I feel (as an image maker) more responsible: How has photographic imagery shaped my existence and my relationships? Does the world need any more photographs? If I think that photographs have affected my life negatively, am I guilty in taking more photographs? Are my photographs a boon or a detriment to my community? Can I use the energy that I feel compelled to exert towards art making to strengthen the community that I am a part of? Can I write my own history?

*Posthumous* was preceded by a similar work titled *The Ex-Girlfriend File* (TEGF). *TEGF* was an installation prompted by my having made a flyer for an exhibition of photographs that I was to have at a local, Richmond gallery. The flyer consisted of two horizontally

stacked, color 4"x6" machine processed C-prints that were photocopied onto a yellow 11"x17" piece of paper. Both images were from previous bodies of work; the top image, *Mom (always)* pictured the clasped hands of a woman resting on a red tablecloth, outfitted in purple latex gloves; the bottom image *George and Matt Show their Scars* was of two men lifting their shirts at a party and showing their appendectomy scars.

In order to list the standard gallery/opening information I wrote directly onto the flyer with a magic marker. Had there not been three other people involved in the exhibit I would have written above both images: "When Mom Crashes the Party". The act of writing on the flyer was integral in the development of my combining text with imagery. Doing this helped me understand where (stylistically) my work was rooted. The idea of putting the word "Mom" in close proximity to an overtly homoerotic image intrigued me- I could easily manipulate the interpretation of these images with just a few words. By applying text to my images I realized that I could use them to encourage people to make associations (that may not have been readily accessible), which reflected my interests in a constant (if casual), study of interpersonal dynamics. Stylistically, this flyer was similar to flyers I had made for one of my previous bands, and would have fit seamlessly on the wall of my high school bedroom amongst the cut-and-paste handbills taken from punk shows that I had attended.

The photograph is text.  
-Joan Foncuberta

Ironically, I had been staunchly opposed to combining my images with text since arriving in Graduate school. During previous semesters I had argued that the images could (and should) “speak” for themselves. I believed that through careful, sustained readings, my intentions in image making could be discerned through the images alone. But, looking at the flyer, I realized the power that language (and handwriting) had over the solitary image. Both elements of the flyer implied action- the snapshot implied me and my camera’s physical and emotional proximity to my subject; the handwriting, being evidence of my physical presence and involvement (an action mostly denied by the mechanical nature of the photograph), asserted my intention to communicate directly to the viewer in a way that would be accessible. Realizing the low-tech, community-based, DIY-approach to living I had been touting was evident in this flyer, I decided to employ similar techniques to illustrate my “ex-girlfriend file”. This file contains a handful of snapshots from my past that I keep in an accordion-style folder amongst pay stubs, receipts, tax, and loan information. I bring out the ex-girlfriend file on those occasions when I am getting to know someone- these pictures are brought out to help illustrate the stories of my past relationships.

Wanting to work immediately on *TEGF*, I decided to use color copies to make enlargements of the images, and was pleased at how degraded the copies ended up being. The poor quality of the color copy seemed analogous to these fading memories. I went to Kinko’s, made 11”x17” color copies of each image from the file, and made the installation on the wall of room 301 in the Pollak Building. The process started by my

writing across the top of the wall “The Ex-Girlfriend File”, and from there progressed chronologically through the file. I configured the images as intuitively as possible, and applied a stream of consciousness technique to generate the text, which I wrote directly on the wall with a permanent marker.

The installation took nine hours to complete, and ended up reflecting the compression that happens to a personal history over time, and showed the loss of complexity necessary to translate experience into language. While making the work, I became aware of the forces that were affecting what I was writing about each ex-girlfriend. The scrutiny that would result from this installation caused me to tell these stories in a way that I never had before- this was the first time that the stories were to be told publicly, and the first time the stories were being committed to written language. During the making of the work, the gravity of committing my personal history to a specific string of words made these stories, which in the past were fluid, and reactive to the context in which they were being told, feel definitive.

...for my part I should prefer that instead of constantly relocating the advent of Photography in its social and economic context, we should also inquire as to the anthropological place of Death and of the new image. For Death must be somewhere in a society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life.  
-Roland Barthes (CLp.92)

Visually, as the file progressed from left to right, the text and imagery became more complex (less compressed), as the file reached the women who had been in my life most

recently. The story of Rachel, my most recent ex-girlfriend, was dense, self conscious, rambling and complicated- the handwriting was cramped, and in severe contrast to the loose, confident writing of the first story about Ann. Using digital imaging storage and transmission as an analogy, Ann's story resembled a compressed digital file- a degraded, easily transmitted, and stored "jpeg"- while Rachel's resembled a "raw" file- dense, complex and not easily transmitted story that takes up a lot of space in storage. In this light, *TEGF* alluded to the loss of complexity that occurs over time. Making the work helped me realize that all photographs, whether analog or digital, are compressed "files" that help us keep track of, access, and cope with the past. Upon completion of the installation, it also became evident to me that I had erected memorials to the women that had been in my life- I had created a wall of the dead; and I had written a portion of my own history.

Like *TEGF*, the installation *Posthumous* at the Anderson Gallery included my ex-girlfriends from *TEGF*, but it also included images and text of my ex- best (male) friends. With Sontag and Barthes' assertions that all photographs are memento mori, (the catastrophe of eventual death) in mind, I wanted *Posthumous* to have the effect of being a wall of the dead- not a wall depicting *actual* death, but a wall of metaphoric, photographic death. This wall of death was to be a celebratory representation (memorial) of the people who had passed through my life, while also being a meditation on the *weight* that the photographs from our past carry in light of our contemporary relationships.

With a clearer idea of what I wanted the work to represent, the preparation for *Posthumous* was more deliberate than it had been with *TEGF*. Writing the text prior to installing the work, I became more interested in the *act* of storytelling than I had been with *TEGF*. With *TEGF* I wanted to convey as much a sense of the act of my making the work as I did the story that was being told. But because of the reaction to *TEGF*, I knew that by applying similar techniques to *Posthumous* (snapshots, color copies, writing on the wall), I could guarantee a response to the evidence of my activity. This “guarantee” allowed me to focus more on how the stories were crafted, how the text and imagery could relay my ideas more universally, and finally, how the effect of the installation- the way it encouraged people to use the space- could affect the interpretation of the piece.

Being interested in allowing the motivation of the work to be open to a variety of interpretations, I eschewed the large title above the work that so quickly contextualized the content of *TEGF*. Further, I edited the texts until they were general enough to not be viewed as meandering, solipsistic self-help exercises, while retaining specificity in each grouping of text and image that would be read as convincing, particular truths. Believing that people would only tolerate so much reading while standing influenced the editing and size of the text. By using the entire east wall of the gallery I was able to spread the images and text throughout the space and encourage a modicum of physical movement. This physical movement of the viewer through the gallery’s space was intended as a companion to the historical and conceptual trajectory of the text and images on the wall.

As the story moved, so did the viewer.

Writing large across a wall is in distinct contrast to presenting this type of work in a book. While experiencing art in a book encourages intimacy between the art and the viewer, I intended this work to be public, and created a situation where multiple people could look, and read the text at once. This idea was precipitated by thinking about the act of watching a movie in a theatre versus at home on a television. I wanted the experience of *experiencing* the work to be a significant element of the piece. The intention was to encourage a collective recognition of a cultural use for photography, while reducing the divisions between the viewers of the work through its universality. In essence, the viewers, standing shoulder to shoulder, should feel a kinship to me, and to the stranger standing next to them.

### The Dead Bird on my Street: *Jay*

A photograph is always invisible, it is not it that we see. –Roland Barthes

The piece *Jay* is the most conventional of all of the works in the exhibit in terms of material and presentation. The piece is not accompanied by any text other than a label identifying its title. But *Jay*, a 2x3” c-print in a white frame, is the most ambiguous, and the most metaphoric of all the pieces in the exhibit. Its placement within the gallery space- isolated and small on a wall by itself- was intended for it to act as a form of punctuation. Being what is essentially the period at the end of a sentence, *Jay* is the most direct representation of death.

I will end this thesis with another vignette. It is my hope that this vignette will shed light on my reasons for including this image in the exhibit. It is not my aim to be direct or clear about the inclusion of this image in the exhibit, but to allow the image to be open to interpretation.

During my last year in Frostburg I knew it was time to leave when I realized that all of my attention was being directed towards the sky. I sat at my window and watched as the pigeons arced over the city. I was envious of their ability to act together so quietly, so wordlessly. In May I greeted the return of the Chimney Swifts, who came back from Peru to roost in the stack across from my apartment. This attention to the birds of Frostburg



led me to start burying all the newly hatched pigeons and fallen swifts that I would find dead on the ground- pushed there by Spring's strong winds, and killed by the fall to pavement.

## Exhibition

*Posthumous* is an exhibition of photographically derived imagery and handwritten text that represents my exploration of the relationship between photographic imagery, lived experience, memory, and history.

The exhibit consists of three separate pieces whose proximity to one another contributes to an overall meditation on, and preoccupation with, metaphoric –as well as- actual death, and the photographic image. *Posthumous*, the focal point, and most expansive of the three pieces in the exhibit, consists of machine processed chromogenic prints, color thermal-prints, and handwritten texts. The imagery is pinned and taped to the wall; the text is applied directly to the wall of the gallery with magic marker, and corresponds to each grouping of imagery. The photographs come from my personal collection of snapshots and focus specifically on my ex-girlfriends, and ex-best friends. The writings in *Posthumous* are culled from my recollection of the trajectory of the relationships, as well as the projection of the history that I want the relationship between the person pictured and myself to represent. The materials utilized in *Posthumous* are configured throughout the space of the east wall of the gallery according to the potentialities and limitations inherent to that space.

The piece *Obit to Self April 10, 2005* consists of three pages of the Washington Post's obituary section from April 10, 2005. The first page features a self-portrait and text that commemorates my death. *Obit to Self April 10, 2005* is mounted in a white frame and hung on the north wall of the gallery.

Directly opposite *Obit to Self April 10, 2005* on the south wall of the gallery, is a small, white-framed chromogenic print of a dead Blue Jay titled *Jay*. *Jay* is hung low and close to the end of the south wall, and is the last piece a viewer would encounter after a left to right reading of the gallery.

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Coleman, A.D., *Depth of Field: Essays on Photography, Mass Media, and Lens Culture*.

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Sontag, Susan., 2003. *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Sontag, Susan., 1989. *On Photography*. 1<sup>st</sup> Anchor Books ed.

New York: Doubleday.

Strauss, David Levi., 2003. *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics*.

New York: Aperture Foundation.

## Works Cited

Boguslawski, Alexander., 1998-2000. *Suprematism* [online]. Russian Painting. Available from: [www.rollins.edu/Foreign\\_Lang/Russian/suprem.html](http://www.rollins.edu/Foreign_Lang/Russian/suprem.html) [Accessed May 2005].

*Cry Freedom*, 1987. Film. Directed by Richard ATTENBOROUGH. UK: Marble Arch Productions.

Curlit, Ivet., 2003. *Looking Awry* [online]. Apexart. Available from: [www.apexart.org/exhibitions/whw.htm](http://www.apexart.org/exhibitions/whw.htm) [Accessed May 2005].

*Hotel Rwanda*, 2004. Film. Directed by Terry GEORGE. USA: United Artists Pictures.

*In the Name of the Father*, 1993. Film. Directed by Jim SHERIDAN. UK: Universal.

*Johnny Got His Gun*, 1971. Film. Dalton TRUMBO. USA: Cinemation.

*The Killing Fields*, 1984. Film. Directed by Roland JOFFE. UK: Warner Brothers

Kostelanetz, Richard., 1981. *Autobiographies*.

Santa Barbara: Mudborn Press.

*Land and Freedom*, 1995. Film. Ken LOACH. UK: Alta Films.

*The Magdalene Sisters*, 2002. Film. Directed by Peter MULLAN. UK: Irish Film Board.

*Missing*, 1982. Film. Directed by Costa-GAVRAS. USA: Universal.

*Romero*, 1989. Film. Directed by John DUIGAN. USA: Four Seasons Entertainment.

*Schindler's List*, 1993. Film. Directed by Steven SPIELBERG. USA: Universal.

Illustrations



*Obit to Self: April 10, 2005*

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ments, talents, your beautiful eyes, your beautiful smile, your love for life and your optimism for the future. A future that is being carried out by those you touched and by the ones in whose lives your legacy still makes a difference. Keep holding your hand on our shoulders and protect all of us.  
All our love, Giola, until we meet again. Mamma, Dad, Sandra, Michelle, Baka and My Tiger

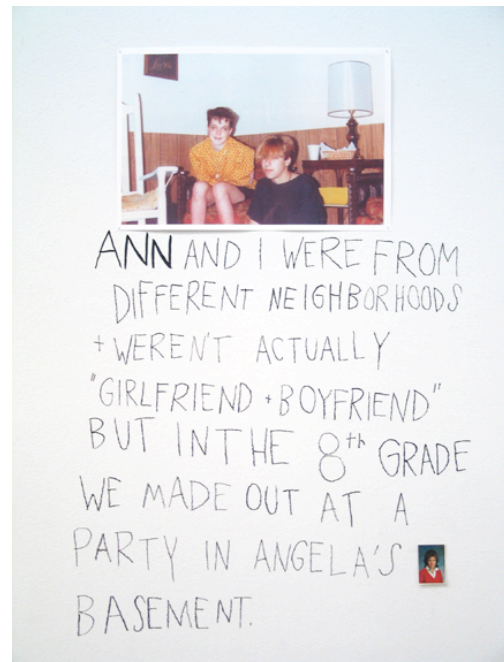
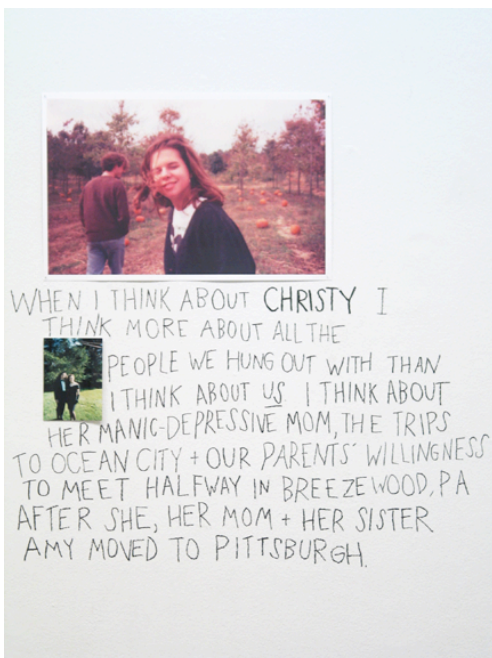


**LEASE, MICHAEL K.** 11/28/72 - 4/10/04  
In memory of an artist, teacher, colleague, friend and lover who through his photographs of friends and family worked to honor, celebrate and strengthen the community he loved.

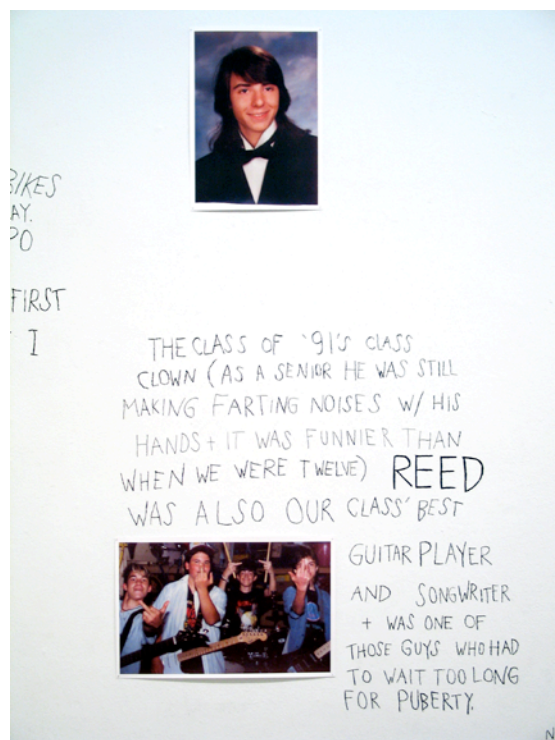
**MURODOCK, MYRTLE N.** 7/6/01 - 4/10/00  
In our hearts your memory lingers,  
Sweetly, tender, kind and true,  
There is not a day, dear one  
That we do not think of you.



*Posthumous – Installation View*











ERIC, HIS MOM + HIS DAD LIVED NEXT TO OUR HOUSE IN MARLTON + WE'D PLAY WITH OUR MATCHBOX CARS, SING SONGS W/ MY SISTER + COME BACK CAKED IN MUD AFTER LONG DAYS OF PLAYING WAR. HE'S A TRUCK

DRIVER NOW + HE CALLED ME A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO WHEN HE WAS PASSING BY FROSTBURG. I NEVER RETURNED HIS CALL - I NEVER CALLED HIM BACK.

WHEN WE FINALLY MET AT THE BAR, RACHEL TOLD ME I WAS COCKY + THAT SHE



HATED ART. AFTER SIX YEARS TOGETHER + THREE YEARS APART, SHE



STILL HAS MY PICTURES ABOVE HER COUCH.





WE WERE INSEPERABLE - RIDING BIKES, WATCHING KUNG FU, OR EVEN SHOOTING UP A NEIGHBOR'S VAN WITH OUR BB GUNS - UNTIL THE SIXTH GRADE WHEN PEOPLE STARTED DEMANDING THAT **JONATHAN** MAKE A CHOICE ABOUT WHAT COLOR HE WAS. I DOUBT OUR PLAN TO LIVE WITH OUR WIVES, OUR PET MONKIES, + SUBSCRIPTIONS TO PLAYBOY + PENTHOUSE WILL HAPPEN.



**MARCY** + I LIVED ON THE SAME FLOOR IN THE DORMS + FOR MOST OF OUR RELATIONSHIP WE WERE NASTY TO ONE ANOTHER. I LEFT COLORADO (IN PART) TO GET AWAY FROM HER, + STILL IT TOOK THREE YEARS FOR US TO BREAK UP. I WONDER IF SHE EVER THINKS ABOUT OUR DOG ANNABELLE.

PAUL AND I WERE ROOMMATES IN FORT COLLINS  
 + I USED TO DREAM THAT WE WOULD MOVE TO  
 RICHMOND + GO SEE CAMPER VAN BEE THOVEN PLAY.

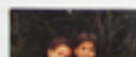


HE LIVES IN SAN LUIS OBISPO  
 NOW W/ HIS GIRLFRIEND

Stephanie AND HE IS THE FIRST  
 GUY ( BESIDES MY DAD) THAT I  
 EVER HUGGED.

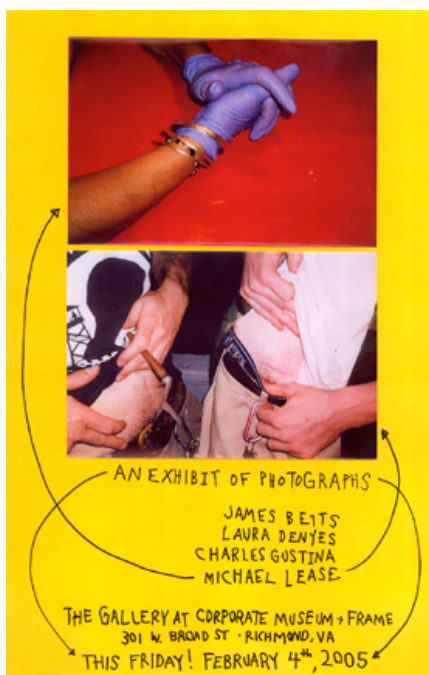


TIM WAS OLDER, TALLER, CUTER, FUNNIER +  
 ALL AROUND MORE DESIREABLE TO GIRLS. HE HAD  
 AN EASY TIME BEING FRIENDS WITH EVERYONE +  
 TAUGHT ME HOW TO DRIVE + PLAY POOL. ALTHOUGH WE  
 DON'T SPEAK, I KNOW THAT HE IS MARRIED + HAS A KID.  
 I LIKE TO THINK OF HIM AS SOMEONE'S DAD.

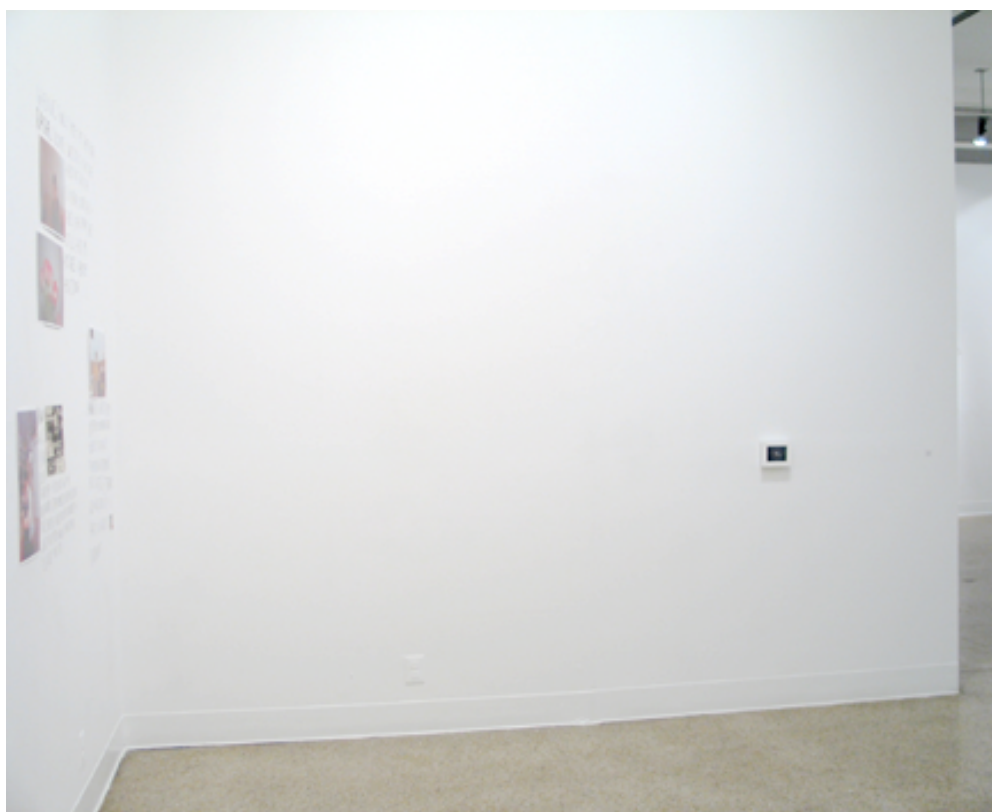


WE WERE INSEPERABLE - RIDING BIKES,  
 WATCHING KUNG FU, OR EVEN SHOOTING UP A





*Exhibition Flyer, 2005*



*Jay* – Installation View



## Vita

### **Personal Information**

***Michael K. Lease***

Born November 28<sup>th</sup> 1972  
Washington, D.C.

### **Education**

#### **MFA Candidate**

Fall 2003-Spring 2005 (Projected Graduation)  
Department of Photography and Film  
School of the Arts  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, VA

#### **Bachelor of Fine Arts**

1994-1996  
Frostburg State University  
Frostburg, MD  
1991-1993  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, CO

## Professional Experience

### **The Hand Workshop Art Center, Richmond, VA**

Assistant Editor of Commentary for book illustrating: *On Site / Artists' Projects*: Wendy Ewald

May 2005

### **The Hand Workshop Art Center, Richmond VA**

Assistant to Facilities Technician, Assistance with Exhibition Installation,

February 2005

### **1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA**

Facilitated photography program *The Changing Face of Richmond: Carver* with Travis Fullerton at George Washington Carver Elementary

November 2004

### **Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA**

Adjunct Faculty for *Concepts in Photography*

Fall 2004

### **Virginia Commonwealth University Richmond VA**

Juror, Inter-Cultural Festival

April 2004

### **Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA**

Organized *A Particular Truth* an Exhibition of work by VCU's Dept. of Photo/Film Graduate Students

November 2004

### **Organization of Photographic Arts Richmond VA**

Gallery Director of Studio 111, Curated and Installed the Exhibits *Place* and *World. Now. Pictured.*

February - May 2004

### **Frostburg State University Frostburg, MD**

Department of Visual Arts

Visiting Lecturer of Photography – Taught Three Sections of Art235 and One Section of Art435 Each Semester, Development of Curriculum, Darkroom and Studio Supervision/Maintenance.

September 2000 – May 2003

### **Allegany Arts Council Cumberland MD**

Taught 2 Workshops that Corresponded with The Allegany Arts Council's *10<sup>th</sup> Annual Photography Exhibition*

February 2002

### **Allegany Arts Council Cumberland MD**

Juror, *9<sup>th</sup> Annual Photography Exhibition*

February 2001

**Frostburg State University** Frostburg, MD

Department of Visual Arts

Professor's Assistant- Assisted Associate Photography Professor, Darkroom Supervisor,  
Studio Supervisor for the University's Photography Courses.

February 1999- May 2001

**Frostburg State University** Frostburg, MDAdjunct Instructor Art 235: *Introduction to Photography*

January 1997

**Frostburg State University** Frostburg, MDAdjunct Instructor Art 235: *Introduction to Photography*

January 1996

**Bibliography****MFA Catalog** VCU School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University 2005**Nightsun** Frostburg State University Literary Journal 2002**Lectures****Picturing Atrocity: Photographs and War**Lecture Addressed to Frostburg State University's History Department's Chapter of Phi  
Alpha Theta

May 2003

**Selected Exhibitions, Awards, and Honors****Travel Grant VCU School of the Arts** \$500 Awarded for travel to Society ofPhotographic Education's National Conference in Portland, Oregon. Will represent VCU  
School of the Arts

March 2005

**Young Photographers Exhibition** Corporate Museum and Frame, Inc. Richmond, VA,

February 2005

**A Particular Truth Group Exhibition** Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL

February 2005

**A Particular Truth Group Exhibition** Frostburg State University, Frostburg MD

October 2004



**Working Grant VCU School of the Arts** \$1100 Awarded towards the organization, shipping, and materials necessary for the traveling exhibit *A Particular Truth*  
May 2003

**Juried Student Fine Arts Exhibition** VCU Anderson Gallery Richmond VA  
April 2003

**Organization of Photographic Arts** Richmond VA Work Featured in Bi-Monthly Exhibits at Studio 111, November 2003–May 2004

**Love You in the Face** (Installation) Lewis J. Ort Library Frostburg State University  
Frostburg, MD, April 2003

**Will's Creek Survey** Juror's Choice and Purchase Award for the Photograph:  
*Bloomington #2*, Cumberland, MD, August 2002

**Washington County Photographic Salon** Hagerstown, MD Two Photographs Selected for Annual Exhibit, April 2002

**Allegany Arts Council's 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Photography Exhibition** Cumberland, MD,  
February 2002

**Faculty and Student Exhibit** FSU, Frostburg, MD, November 2001

**Faculty Exhibition** FSU, Frostburg, MD, February 2001

**AAC's 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Photography Exhibition** Cumberland, MD, February 2000

**Regional Survey** Delaplaine Arts Center Frederick, MD June 1998

**Group Show** Blue Elephant Gallery, Frederick MD, November 1997

**Five Years** (with Shane Sellers) Mary Conlon Gallery, Frederick Community College,  
Frederick, MD, July 1997

**AAC's 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Photography Exhibition** (Best of Show) Cumberland, MD,  
February 1996